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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: GOT PROTESTS GEORGIAN SEIZURE OF MERCHANT SHIPS

REF: TBILISI 1587

¶1. (SBU) The GOT has protested the seizure of two ships, which, it claims, were stopped by the Georgian Coast Guard in international waters in the Black Sea off the coast of Georgia and taken into the port of Poti (see reftel). The Turkish-crewed Panamanian-flagged oil tanker "Buket," which was carrying fuel from Turkey, was seized August 15. The Cambodian-flagged "Afro Star," also sailing under a Turkish crew, was seized August 19. It was carrying cargo from Turkey. According to Turkish press reports, the ships, crew and cargo remain under Georgian custody and Georgian authorities are demanding payment of a fine.

¶2. (SBU) According to Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Maritime Department Section Head Haldun Tekneci, the Turkish embassy in Tbilisi demarched the Georgians on the seizures last week. The MFA also convoked a Georgian diplomat to protest the seizures and demand the immediate release of the ships, crew and cargo.

¶3. (SBU) According to Tekneci, the Georgian MFA responded with a diplomatic note, which asserted that the seizures are consistent with Georgian law and Georgia's jurisdiction over its "maritime space" (see ref a). Tekneci described the issue as at a stalemate. He added that he found the Georgian reaction frustrating. Tekneci noted that the Turkish MFA issues a notice to mariners cautioning Turkish vessels about operating in "restricted areas" off the coast of Abkhazia.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: The seizures have received limited media coverage and the MFA appears intent upon quietly trying to gain the release of the ships, crews and cargos.

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